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ABSTRACT

It is argued that the increasing linguistic and cultural diversity in public schools requires teachers to be more sensitive to how children maintain effective cross-cultural communication, and be aware of barriers that affect interaction in culturally diverse classrooms. Sociocultural factors that shape the perspectives of all students should be considered in language arts programs. The work of a number of researchers concerning the role of language in the classroom, both in general and for language minority children, is reviewed and the language- and culture-related issues that should be addressed in teacher education are discussed. Ten assumptions underlying language arts education are outlined, and ways in which language arts teachers should celebrate and value diversity are enumerated, drawing on recent research. Finally, guidelines are offered for addressing students' communication needs in multicultural settings, including both conceptual concerns and practical classroom techniques. Contains 44 references. (MSE)

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A Multicultural Approach for Empowerment in Language Arts Classrooms

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A Multicultural Approach for Empowerment in Language Arts Classrooms

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Background and Context

The increasing linguistic and cultural diversity in the U.S. public schools require teachers to be more sensitive to how children attempt to maintain an effective cross-cultural communication. Since language and literacy development, which are bound by many cultural connotations and definitions, are important aspects of communication arts, teachers must be aware of the barriers that may affect the interaction process in diverse classrooms. Thus, the role of sociocultural factors that shape the insights and perspectives of diverse students in the process of interacting with others cannot be ignored mainly in language arts programs.

In fact, diverse students come to the classroom with a limited view of the use of various aspects of the English language and its symbols; yet, they tend to employ their culturally-bound aspects of their native language which may cause miscommunication in English. Therefore, teachers need to foster a classroom environment where these symbolic differences are taken into consideration. They also need to create conditions that promote effective communication arts while valuing the cross-cultural knowledge of their students. These conditions involve embracing linguistic and cultural diversity, contextualizing learning tasks and activities, and utilizing language functions to effectively maintain a meaningful interaction.

Most importantly, the classroom pedagogy should center around empowering all students to communicate creatively in a more culture-friendly environment. Since language is a very vital tool for such empowerment, teachers should encourage students to communicate their unique meanings with others in order to promote more cross-cultural understanding in the diverse classrooms.

Establishing Rapport

There has been a genuine effort over the past few years to integrate multidisciplinary components in the teacher education programs. The need for such integration has been dictated by the changing fabric of our society and its influences on education. This is

especially more compelling in language arts and literacy programs given the power language exerts on the child's academic development.

Recognizing the need for such knowledge base in elementary schools, Reagan (1997) outlines the several areas for both preservice and inservice teachers. In particular, Reagan's plan has profound implications for teachers in glowingly diverse language arts classrooms. According to Reagan (1997, p.187), teachers must be immersed in the following areas: (1) the nature of language; (2) the components of language; (3) the process of language acquisition; (4) language and culture; (5) linguistics and literacy; (6) TESOL methodologies; (7) language pathology; and (8) language policy and planning in education.

These elements are not only significant for teachers to understand mainstream learners in elementary schools, but are also fruitful for students who have special needs and circumstances. In other words, linguistically diverse students can better be understood in their unique linguistic abilities and social skills. Typically, linguistically diverse learners bring a large repertoire of knowledge about *language* as a universal human phenomenon. Unfortunately, such asset is frequently misconstrued by many teachers who view linguistic diversity as a barrier to learning and academic achievement.

Few decades ago, linguists and language educators have revolutionized the way language is viewed in elementary language arts and reading classrooms. These researchers have shifted their interest from how linguistically smart learners are to how they are linguistically smart (Chomsky, 1985; Gardner, 1983). For example, Brooks (1964) coined the term *languistics* to refer to the art of language learning and teaching which allows us to see how the universal construct we call *language* comes alive in linguistically diverse language arts classrooms. Fundamentally, teachers' understanding of the mechanisms of language universals and functions in the life of children will help them better understand and thus meet the students' academic and linguistic needs (Peregoy & Boyle, 1997). It also helps teachers to understand the uniqueness in every child through the language they bring to the classroom.

Since "when we study human language, we are approaching what some might call the 'human essence'" (Chomsky, 1972, in Fromkin & Rodman, 1993, p. 3), the unique and distinctive characteristics of children, especially the linguistically diverse, are revealed through linguistic and cultural mediation processes in the classroom. In their quest to get insight into learning through language, teachers need the *languistic* skills in language arts classrooms (Hammerly, 1987). Reflecting on the value of this notion in the *kid-watching* process in language arts classrooms, Wells (1986) maintains that such an exciting task of understanding learners and their needs lies in Chomsky's claim that *language* is a window on child's mind.

In addition to the creative aspect of language use, Chomsky (1987) asserts that "all languages are cast to the same mold of similarities at the deeper level" (personal communication). This universal aspects of language allow diverse student populations to engage themselves in *inventive semantics* and creative ways of doing language (Piper, 1998; Stice et al., 1995). Accordingly, many linguists and language educators have revisited the labeling practices of non-English speaking students. For example, the use of the acronym LEP (Limited English Proficient)--which has many offensive overtones-- to describe the linguistically diverse child has been waning as some researchers use more such euphemistic alternative terms as PEP (Potentially English Proficient) (Freeman & Freeman, 1993), and REAL (Readers and Writers of English as Another Language) (Rigg & Allen, 1989).

Whatever the case may be, it is more realistic, in all fairness to the linguistically diversity child, to get the credit they deserve in terms of their language proficiency and literacy skills. It is thus more meaningful to describe such children in terms of their Language Extended Proficiency (LEP) that will put them at a large advantage in developing language literacy skills in other languages. Such characterization is implied in the notion of *additive bilingualism* where such knowledge about language is not only a linguistic asset in children (Cummins, 1989; Hakuta, 1990; Krashen, 1998), but also a cognitive and social advantage given their larger frame of reference (Banks, 1994), their greater potential for academic excellence (Hakuta, 1986; Perez & Torres-Guzman, 1996), and their richer schemata for mediation and discourse (Hymes, 1979).

However, one area of difficulty in classrooms may relate to the students' previously learned linguistic and interactional patterns pertaining to both cultures and languages at issue, both of which affect the learning process. Although linguistically diverse students may be limited in the target language at the productive proficiency levels, they have an unlimited metalinguistic awareness and cross-linguistic mediation skills. Research indicates that second language learners who come to school already mastering a native language are more likely to enhance their linguistic intelligence than monolingual ones (Garcia, 1991; Garcia, 1994; Hakuta, 1986). At the same time, they tend to have a broader social schemata that enable them to interact in multiple ways in diverse contexts (Peregoy & Boyle, 1997). Compared to their monolingual counterparts, diverse learners are more apt to enhance their linguistic intelligence and cognitive abilities in the learning/teaching situation (Krashen, 1998).

Embedded in the interaction process is an *adult-watching* strategy employed by linguistically diverse learners who tend to learn not only by doing language but also by observing how language is used by peers and others around them. They are also aware of what others expect of their abilities in the learning/teaching situations. Thus, it is important

that the reciprocity of watching (i.e. kid-watching vs. adult-watching) is well-balanced in diverse classrooms. So, if expectations of children are congruent with their vast linguistic and intellectual potential, they will excel in academic achievement and language production. But, when conditions in the learning environment are not conducive to these expectations, they will act in terms of the self-fulfilling prophecy and reflect these low expectations in their academic achievement (Levin, 1988; Nieto, 1996)

Having this in mind, and speaking of who should teach linguistically diverse students, Thonis (1990) argues that there are minimum competencies required of teachers to be effective with diverse children. Most of these competencies revolve around a genuine understanding of the nature of language and its role in the life of children. Likewise, understanding the process of both first and second language acquisition will help teachers better understand learning and teaching strategies in the classroom (Ramirez, 1995; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Krashen, 1982; Krashen & Terrell, 1983).

Teacher's awareness of the cross-linguistic problems, encountered by second language learners in diverse classrooms, becomes the major step in empowering students to interact in the new language ((Peregoy & Boyle, 1997; Diaz-Rico & Weed, 1995; Odlin, 1993). The issue here involves culturally equitable pedagogical practices in language instruction, because the less compatible instructional methods are, the more sociocultural and linguistic factors relevant to the learner are undermined (Ladson-Billings, 1995). These challenges facing language teachers intensify in culturally diverse settings. To thwart any linguistic barriers in second language classrooms, it is helpful to consider the philosophical underpinnings that underlie the teaching of the English language arts in diverse settings.

Underlying Assumptions

In addition to the above conceptual framework for language acquisition in diverse environments, there are several assumptions that underlie the discussion of language arts instruction schools. These are:

(1) Students come to the class with informal information about the world around them;

(2) Students have their own preferred ways of interacting with the new linguistic knowledge;

(3) Classroom settings hardly represent students' prior linguistic and cultural experiences;

(4) Students tend to creatively use and apply what they already know to new learning experiences including their first language patterns;

(5) Knowledge in the native language is significant in learning and teaching the new language and its avenues;

(6) The transfer of first language behavior may hinder or enhance the communication process in second language settings;

(7) The transfer of first language patterns to English may result in confusion and miscommunication between teachers and students and vice versa;

(8) Language mirrors the sociocultural background of learners and teachers, and vice versa;

(9) There is an interdependent, rather than a rival, relationship between the first and second language of the child;

(10) Multilingualism is both a cognitive and social asset conducive to higher academic achievement.

These assumptions should be the foundation for any language arts and literacy program in today's schools. Also teachers should not have prior assumptions that are biased against the cultures or languages represented in their classrooms.

Understanding these constructs pertaining to language and language diversity in children can help us cross the cultural boundaries in a more tolerant and harmonious manner in a culturally diverse setting (Diaz-Rico & Weed, 1995; Lustig & Koester, 1996). Since all languages are equally important in meeting the intrinsic and communicative needs of humans, no language is superior to another. Thus successful intercultural communication in language arts classrooms requires a global awareness of cross-linguistic and cross-cultural expectations of all participants in schools.

Teaching Communication Arts Multiculturally

One of the major components of multiculturalism is to promote sensitivity to students' communication patterns in culturally diverse settings. This is especially important in language arts and reading classrooms. The multicultural approach to language arts and literacy instruction values multiple ways of communicating in various learning environments, thus matching the academic, social, and linguistic needs of all students. These needs may vary widely due to differences in race, sex, ethnicity, or sociolinguistic backgrounds of the students and educators.

Through the process of integrating multicultural education in all avenues of language arts, students can develop self-esteem, and respect those who are different from in their sociolinguistic behavior. Such an approach will also foster students' and educators' ability to analyze critically and make intelligent decisions about real-life problems and issues through a democratic process of communication.

In addition to understanding learners and their needs, multicultural education has focused on building cultural and linguistic links among participants in schools. In particular, educators in diverse language arts classrooms should celebrate and value individuals through:

(1) awareness and appreciation of different experiences relevant to all minorities and other ethnic groups in the American society;

(2) an understanding of the nature of the pluralistic society and its implications for the communicative process in schools;

(3) creating optimal opportunities for learning by interacting multiculturally;

(4) an understanding of students' attitudes, values, and other motivational forces that significantly affect the communicative process;

(5) acquiring multicultural knowledge to augment the democratic spirit in classrooms so that mutual communication can take place meaningfully;

(6) learning effective communication and mediation styles that are conducive to students of diverse sociocultural backgrounds;

(7) utilizing multicultural competence in terms of the unique contextual demands of the communicative event.

To do so, Banks (1994) suggests a four-level approach for education in diverse settings. His approach has also profound implications for language instruction and literacy development. This multi-level conceptualization includes the action approach, the transformation approach, the additive approach, and the contributions approach. These approaches can serve as a useful tool in promoting students' language and literacy skills in multicultural settings. First, students are encouraged to take action to solve learning through language and in terms of their meaningful way of interaction that is bound by their sociocultural make-up. Second, the multiculturally transformed language arts curriculum enables learners to view as a meaningful vehicle to build cultural and linguistic linkages and empathy among all students. Furthermore, students are afforded with added universal elements of language that enrich their educational opportunities in schools. Finally, students see themselves and their cultures through the contributions of their native languages to understanding the essence of humanity.

Pedagogical Implications for Language Arts Teachers

Students come to schools reflecting diverse cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds. They also bring differences in their socialization and interactional patterns along with their value systems. Their experiences are different as they come from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Indeed, they play a significant role in shaping children's modes

of learning. Since these differences "often result in cultural discontinuity or lack of cultural synchronization between the students and the school" (Irvine & York, 1995, p. 489), educational discourse should value them to maximize educational opportunities for all learners.

In a culturally diverse settings, the issue of valuing communication modes through language and literacy skills requires a comprehensive approach to enhance mutual understanding through engagement (Borden, 1991; Brislin, 1993). Although it seems impossible to understand interactional orientation of all students, cultural conflicts in the classroom can be reduced through the integration of multicultural education in the school's curriculum, and the multiculturation of the school environment. Such an approach will achieve the balance between the school's input and its desired educational outcomes. For this approach to be successful, it must be multidisciplinary and multicultural.

For many years, there has been a benign neglect of cultural differences in schools. This has led to victimizing students of color because of the mismatch between learning and teaching situations. In other words, educational practices have not been appealing to the educational needs of diverse populations (Nieto, 1996), and many language minority students have been set to failure (Banks, 1997). As far as learning and teaching are concerned, Swisher (1992) argues that schools generally adapt to the analytical or field-independent learners, thus depriving students from doing well because of such incongruence. However, while students have to adjust to schools, they "should not have to bear sole responsibility for adapting or changing" (Swisher, 1992, p. 76).

Therefore, schools should be sensitive to and adapt to learners' differences in an effort to provide conditions conducive to learning and meaningful intercultural, and cross-linguistic communication (Lustig & Koester, 1996). Otherwise, "a lock-step educational program guarantees that many will be locked out of that best education. 'Nothing is more unequal than the equal treatment of unequals.' Sameness of education for all guarantees educational inequity for many" (Cortes, 1990, p. 14). Thus, participants in the communicative process should become more sensitive to the multifaceted nature of educational and social institutions. As far as linguistic diversity is concerned, teachers must deal with bilingual and ESL students in terms of the dimensions and foundations of language acquisition through valuing the uniqueness of children and their great potential (Ovando & Collier, 1998; Lessow-Hurley, 1996; Seelye, 1993; Rigg & Allen, 1989). Language arts classrooms are seen as the most logical labs for such social change and educational reform.

A multicultural model will allow all students to encounter the new culture straight-on, thus managing the temptation to withdraw, and gradually adjusting expectations and behaviors

to fit the reality of the culture (Borden, 1991; Brislin, 1993; Storti, 1989). By the same token, teachers in today's diverse classrooms, can thwart cultural incongruence by adapting to various cultural expectations in the communicative process (Lustig & Koester, 1996).

As far as language arts instruction is concerned, a multicultural approach to communication arts requires congruity among various modes of interactional discourse. Although this can be achieved in many ways, the following guidelines provide language arts teachers with implications relevant students' communication needs in multicultural settings:

(1) Understanding the linguistically and culturally diverse learners along with the sociocultural context of learning and teaching;

(2) Being flexible in terms of the contextual demands of learning and teaching situations;

(3) Enticing the learner's cultural schemata through active participation of all learners and self-disclosure activities;

(4) Utilizing all levels of intelligence through considering various modes of instruction that appeal to the learner's senses, cognitive, and social skills;

(5) Assessing students' preferred ways of communicating and learning by using formal and informal techniques;

(6) Encouraging cooperative learning and sharing of experiences so that students are exposed to the communication and learning styles of their peers in the class;

(7) Empathizing with the learners by communicating efficiently with students in terms of their cultural orientations;

(8) Encouraging acculturation of students while maintaining pride in their linguistic, cultural identity and self-concept;

(9) Creating an anxiety-free and culture-friendly environment through considering the physical and affective domains that value and celebrate diversity;

(10) Deliberate delivering of content in a variety of ways to make it more comprehensible and meaningful to all students;

(11) Working with parents and maintaining a cultural and educational continuity between home and school;

(12) Using linguistic and non-linguistic cues to facilitate the communicative process in language arts classrooms;

(13) Using multicultural literature which is rich in cross-linguistic cues and enhances positive images of all students.

To achieve their role as cultural mediators and effective communicators, language arts teachers should possess several competencies to cultivate cultural diversity. Banks (1994) delineates several multicultural traits for teachers in the pluralistic society. According to

Banks (1994, p.251), teachers must have democratic attitudes and values, a clarified pluralistic ideology, a process conceptualization of ethnic studies, the ability to view society from diverse ethnic perspectives and points of view, knowledge of the emerging stages of ethnicity, and knowledge of the complex nature of ethnicity in Western societies. Having these characteristics can help teachers function and communicate effectively in pluralistic environments. Consequently, teachers having these traits will "reach a state of *additive multiculturalism* . . . also may enjoy advantages over monoculturals, including a broader view of reality . . . and multicultural flexibility" (Nieto, 1996, p.347).

In conclusion, the role of teachers in today's diverse classroom has to be revisited in light of pluralizing the school's culture. Teachers must cultivate the unique diversity in the classroom and communicate in a proactive manner that values and celebrates students' differences. They also should demonstrate flexibility and empathy in the interactional process to create a culturally congruent ambiance in the learning teaching context.

Finally, assessing the communicative process in terms of multiculturalism and linguistic diversity provides teachers with key elements in the success of all students. It also provides new directions and foundations in the augmentation of progress in student learning and self-esteem.

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